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HUSBAND

Marital Satisfaction in Couples with an Alcoholic Husband

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### Abstract

Both members of 15 heterosexual couples with an alcoholic husband (AC) and of 15 matched couples with healthy members (HC) filled out first, the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), second, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967), and finally, a questionnaire on emotional feeling state in which the participant had to evaluate his or her own emotions and the emotions experienced by his or her partner. Results showed that both AC members reported lower marital satisfaction and a lower level of self-esteem than HC members. Furthermore, they were less congruent with their partner regarding the evaluation of their partner's emotional feeling states (EFS). These deficits could have repercussions on marital happiness, which itself would have repercussions on the alcoholic's treatment.

Keywords: alcoholism, communication, marital satisfaction, self-esteem

### Marital Satisfaction in Couples with an Alcoholic Husband

In the treatment of alcoholism, the reduction of alcohol consumption is partly dependent on a series of factors related to the patient, but also on factors related to the patient's couple relationship. Indeed, previous research has shown that the level of marital satisfaction and the involvement of the partner in the treatment for alcoholism are good prognostics of a reduction in alcohol consumption (e.g., McCrady et al., 1991; Vannicelli et al., 1983). The present study focuses on marital satisfaction in couples in which only the husband is suffering from alcoholism. In this article, these couples are referred to as Alcoholic Couples (AC).

Most AC have reported low satisfaction regarding their couple relationship (for a review, see Marshal, 2003). In fact, the level of marital satisfaction in AC is similar to that of couples with nonalcoholic conflicted marriages (e.g., Jacob & Leonard, 1992; McLeod, 1993; O'Farrell & Birchler, 1987; Schiavi et al., 1995). Previous studies, with relatively large sample sizes (between 83 and 634 couples), have reported a negative association between alcohol problems or heavy use of alcohol and marital satisfaction (Dumka & Roosa, 1993, 1995; Homish & Leonard, 2007; Zweben, 1986). Unsatisfying sex life; verbal, physical, and sexual aggressions; and divorce are some of the manifestations of this marital dissatisfaction (e.g., Cunradi et al., 2002; Marshal, 2003; O'Farrell et al., 1997; Prescott & Kendler, 2001).

The association between problem drinking and marital dissatisfaction appears to be reciprocal (Halford et al., 1999). On the one hand, alcohol abuse contributes to marital distress through the many stresses it creates (e.g., financial problems, job problems, embarrassing incidents, verbal and physical abuse, poor parenting). On the other hand, marital distress often contributes to the maintenance of problem drinking. Indeed, marital problems stimulate excessive drinking (Davis et al., 1974), precipitate relapse by abstinent alcoholics (Humphreys et al., 1996; Maisto et al., 1988), and are predictive of a poor prognosis of

abstinence in alcohol treatment programs (Vannicelli et al., 1983). Marital distress can even predict problem drinking. In a longitudinal study, Whisman et al. (2006) reported that people in dissatisfied marriages were 3.7 times more likely to report problems with drinking 12 months after the first assessment, in comparison with satisfied partners. Thus, the influences of marital problems on heavy use of alcohol are widely documented.

In healthy couples, an individual's level of marital satisfaction is primarily a function of his or her personal characteristics (Neyer & Voigt, 2004) such as problem-solving skills; adaptability; assertiveness; the perception, expression, and management of emotions; self-esteem; impulsiveness; self-motivation; empathy; or optimism (Johnson et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2008). Moreover, marital satisfaction is also dependent on communication of emotions between spouses (Smith et al., 2008). Despite the role of marital satisfaction in the success of the treatment of alcoholism, no study has yet investigated the association between personal characteristics as well as couple characteristics and marital satisfaction in AC. It is well known that alcoholics report low self-esteem (review in Corte, 2007) and show deficits in cognitive empathy, as documented by the research on nonverbal emotional behavior decoding (for a review, see Uekermann & Daum, 2008). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the association between marital satisfaction, levels of self-esteem and congruence with the partner regarding the evaluation of the partner's emotional feeling states (EFS). We will now describe both factors and their association to marital satisfaction and alcohol consumption in more detail.

Research on healthy individuals has shown that self-esteem is a correlate of marital satisfaction. Specifically, the research suggests that individuals with low self-esteem are typically less satisfied with their couple relationship than individuals with high self-esteem (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Shackelford, 2001). They are more likely to break up over a one-month period (Hendrick et al., 1988); they engage in a greater variety of potentially

couple destructive behaviors (Murray et al., 2002); and they express more feelings of manic love (Campbell et al., 2002) and of love for others (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986).

Furthermore, women complain more about husbands with low self-esteem than about husbands with high self-esteem (Shackelford, 2001).

In addition, low self-esteem is a characteristic of alcoholism (for a review, see Corte, 2007). Alcoholics endorse fewer positive and more negative adjectives as being self-descriptive compared to healthy individuals (Corte & Stein, 2007; Pushkash & Quereshi, 1980; Quereshi & Soat, 1976; Tarquinio et al., 2001). Previous research has shown that low global self-esteem prospectively predicts the development of alcohol use disorders in women (Walitzer & Sher, 1996) and that self-esteem improves with abstinence (Corte & Stein, 2007; Tarquinio et al., 2001). It is likely that the stress of living with an alcoholic has an impact on self-esteem. The alcoholic's wife is frequently exposed to repeated verbal abuse, such as blaming, ridiculing, insulting, swearing, yelling, and humiliation (e.g., Stanley, 2008). Repeated instances of such verbal abuse have long-term negative effects on self-esteem and contribute to feelings of uselessness, worthlessness, and self-blame (Campbell, 1995). Shackelford (2001) found that women who are criticized by their husband regarding their appearance or who are insulted by him reported low self-esteem. Moreover, a husband's repeated verbal abuse was the most consistent predictor of low self-esteem among wives. Furthermore, it seems that the self-esteem of both partners is concordant (Schafer & Keith, 1992; Shackelford, 2001). To the best of our knowledge, the self-esteem of an alcoholic's wife has not yet been quantitatively investigated, but we would expect that a wife in this position would show low self-esteem.

The ability to interpret nonverbal emotional cues plays an important role in maintaining successful relationships (Carton et al., 1999). To be aware of what other people

feel and think, in other words, to be able to take on the perspective of others, contributes to the creation and maintenance of effective interactions.

It is now widely documented that alcoholics present some deficits in the accurate decoding of nonverbal emotional cues. Research on this issue has concentrated on deficits in decoding emotional facial expression and, to a lesser extent, on prosody (see Uekermann & Daum, 2008, for a review). The decoding deficit of emotional facial expressions is related to interpersonal problems (Kornreich et al., 2002), which in turn may lead to relapse (Philippot et al., 2003). Kornreich et al. (2002) suggested that alcoholics may not use correctly the cues from their interaction partner's nonverbal behavior because of their difficulty in achieving a finely tuned appraisal of their partner's intentions and feelings. In couple relationships, this impairment could lead to marital conflict and dissatisfaction. In their study, O'Farrell and Birchler (1987) compared couples with marital conflict with an alcoholic husband versus those with a nonalcoholic husband. They showed that, in comparison with husbands from nonalcoholic couples, alcoholic husbands had a less accurate perception of the behaviors that their wife wanted them to change. Nevertheless, nonalcoholic wives do not differ in their perceptions when AC, maritally conflicted couples, and maritally nonconflicted couples are compared. Furthermore, Epstein et al. (1997), in a study comparing AC with early onset alcoholics to AC with late onset alcoholics, reported that the partner's interpersonal perceptual accuracy was a predictor of the subject's marital adjustment. Thus, male alcoholics seem to have a wrong perception of their wife's needs, and that factor could contribute to the AC's low marital adjustment.

Results from Sferrazza et al. (2002) support the idea that verbal communication regarding emotions is less frequent in AC than in Healthy Couples (HC). Indeed, in their study, 25 AC and 25 HC had to choose an emotional event experienced together and to report whether they had communicated about the event and with whom. The results showed that HC

members had communicated more frequently with their partner about this event than AC members. This weaker verbal communication regarding emotions can diminish the available cues that are necessary in order to be aware of the partner's emotions and intentions, and thus can diminish the possibility of being congruent with the partner regarding the evaluation of the partner's EFS.

Only Sferrazza et al. (2002) have investigated the cognitive empathy of both AC partners, and surprisingly, the results did not show that alcoholics and their partners experienced difficulty in perceiving accurately the EFS reported by their partner. Yet, as you will see below, this study may be criticized from a methodological point of view.

Thus, we hypothesized that, within the context of the couple relationship, the alcoholic's wife is not congruent with her husband regarding the evaluation of his EFS. Yet, the wives of alcoholics have usually reported depression and anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2006; Tempier et al., 2006), which are related to emotional facial expression decoding bias (e.g., Joormann & Gotlib, 2006; Lee et al., 2005; Mikhailova et al., 1996). The low frequency of interactions between AC partners could also contribute to a low congruence with the husband in the wives of alcoholics.

To evaluate the level of congruence, we used part of the questionnaire on couples' emotional communication used by Sferrazza et al. (2002). In their study, both partners of AC and HC completed a questionnaire addressing the type, the intensity of, the frequency of, and control over, emotions, first for themselves (*self-attributed items*), and then for their partner (*attributed-to-the-partner items*). Results showed that AC members were as congruent with their partner as HC members regarding the evaluation of their partner's EFS. Nevertheless, in the study by Sferrazza et al., analyses were computed on the difference between the subject's attributed-to-the-partner items and his or her partner's self-attributed items. The authors computed their analyses on real numbers, conserving the sign (i.e., positive or negative

values). So, if some AC members underestimated the EFS reported by their partner, whereas some other AC members overestimated it (and to a greater extent than HC members), no group effect would emerge because underestimation and overestimation errors would cancel each other out. The present study remedies this limitation by considering two independent scores, one for overestimation and one for underestimation.

In the present investigation, we sought to remedy the lack of research on the association between marital satisfaction, self-esteem and, the congruence regarding the evaluation of the EFS in AC. Drawing on previous research involving AC and HC, the following hypotheses were tested: (a) both AC members will show a lower level of marital satisfaction, lower self-esteem, and a lower level of congruence than HC members; (b) in HC, marital satisfaction will be correlated with self-esteem, as well as with the congruence; (c) both partners of the same HC will be concordant on each measure. This study explores whether these correlations are different in AC compared to HC.

## Method

### *Participants*

Sixty participants were recruited. The AC group was composed of 15 male inpatients diagnosed with alcohol dependence according to DSM-IV criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) together with their nonalcoholic wives. The patients were designated Alcoholic Husbands (AH) and their partners were designated Alcoholic's Wives (AW). The HC group included 15 healthy individuals (matched with an AH) – designated Healthy Husbands (HH) – and of their Healthy Wives (HW). AH were recruited in four hospitals in Belgium (Clinique Saint Vincent, Rocourt; Centre Hospitalier Régional de la Citadelle, Liège; Centre Hospitalier Spécialisé l'Accueil, Lierneux; and Centre Hospitalier Universitaire, Liège) during their detoxification process and were not using other psychotropic drugs at the time of the assessment. They had abstained from alcohol for at least 3 days ( $M = 46.87$  days,



$SD = 38.88$ ). The mean of previous detoxification treatments was 1.93 ( $SD = 2.60$ ) and the mean duration of alcoholism (since the first hospitalization) was 43.06 months ( $SD = 72.69$ ). Severity of alcohol dependence was assessed using the Severity of Alcohol Dependence Questionnaire (SADQ; Stockwell et al., 1983) whose total score ranges from 0 to 60. The mean of the total score was 23.20 ( $SD = 11.71$ ), which indicates a moderate severity of dependence.

AC members were matched with members of 15 HC for age of the husband and length of cohabitation. HC members were free of any psychiatric record and were recruited among the experimenters' acquaintances. All couples were cohabiting, heterosexual, and French speaking. Partners had been together for at least 4 years.

At the time of the assessment, all participants were provided with full details regarding the aim of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects prior to testing.

### *Measures*

#### *Marital satisfaction*

Marital satisfaction was measured using a French version of the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Kimmel & Van der Keen, 1974; Locke & Wallace, 1959). This questionnaire is a 15-item instrument designed to assess levels of marital satisfaction and adjustment of husbands and wives to each other. The total score is the sum of all items, ranging from 2 to 158. This scale is standardized with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Higher scores indicate better marital adjustment. Clinically, marital distress is defined as a score of less than 85.

#### *Self-Esteem*

Participants were asked to fill in the adult form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (CSEI; Coopersmith, 1967). This 58-item self-report questionnaire is designed to measure attitudes toward the self in four areas: (a) social, (b) familial, (c) personal, and (d)

professional (e.g., “I’m a lot of fun to be with”, “My family usually considers my feelings”, “I’m pretty sure of myself”, “I’m not doing as well at work as I’d like to”). The CSEI is dichotomously scored based on respondents’ endorsement of statements such as *like me* or *unlike me*. The scale provides a global score ranging from 0 to 58.

*Congruence with the partner regarding the evaluation of the partner’s EFS*

We employed part of a French questionnaire developed by the Clinical and Social Research units from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium, Pr P. Philippot and Miss C. Tang). This short version of the questionnaire is made up of 24 questions, which subjects were asked to answer on a 10-point Likert scale (see Appendix for an English translation of the questionnaire). The questionnaire contains four categories of questions related to the category of experienced emotions in general (shame, joy, fear, guilt, affection, jealousy, sadness, anguish, and anger), the intensity, the frequency, and the control of these emotions. For each question, the subject has to evaluate (a) his or her own emotions (self-attributed items) and (b) the emotions experienced by his or her partner (attributed-to-the-partner items).

In order to evaluate the congruence between the subject’s evaluation of his or her partner’s EFS and the partner’s evaluation of his or her own EFS in terms of category, intensity, frequency and control of emotions – in other words, to know whether the EFS reported by the subject were perceived correctly by his or her partner – we computed scores that were the absolute values of the difference between the subject’s attributed-to-the-partner items and his or her partner’s self-attributed items on each question on the questionnaire. We created two dependent variables. The first is *underestimation* and contains the score in cases where subjects underestimated the EFS (category, intensity, frequency and control) reported by their partner. In cases where the subject overestimated the EFS reported by his or her partner or where the congruence was perfect, this variable is equal 0. The second variable, *overestimation*, contains the score only in cases where subjects overestimated the EFS

reported by their partner. Each score ranges from 0 to 9; higher scores indicate a worse congruence.

## Results

### *Demographic measures*

No significant differences emerged between AC members and HC members in terms of age, education, length of couple relationship, or length of cohabitation. No correlation reached statistical significance between demographic measures, on the one hand, and marital satisfaction, self-esteem, and congruence on the other hand. Means for these analyses are reported in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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### *Group comparisons*

#### *Marital satisfaction*

A 2 x 2 factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA) with group [AH and AW vs. HH and HW] and gender [AH and HH vs. AW and HW] as between-subjects factors was conducted on the global MAT score. A main effect of group was found,  $F = 28.42$ , 1/56 df,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .34$ . AC reported a lower level of marital satisfaction than HC. Neither main effect of gender nor Group x Gender interaction were found. Means for these analyses are reported in Table 1.

#### *Self-Esteem*

A 2 x 2 (Group x Gender) ANOVA was conducted on the global score of the CSEI. A main effect of group was found,  $F = 12.78$ , 1/56 df,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .19$ . AC reported a

significantly lower level of self-esteem than HC. Neither main effect of gender nor Group x Gender interaction effect were found. Means for these analyses are reported in Table 1.

*Congruence with the partner regarding the evaluation of the partner's EFS*

In order to investigate the differences between AC and HC members in terms of congruence, 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVAs with direction (underestimation vs. overestimation) as a within-subject factor, and with group and gender as between-subjects factors were conducted on the intensity, frequency, and control scores, as well as on the frequency scores for each investigated emotion. All the statistics for these analyses are reported in Table 2 and means are presented in Table 3. In this section, we will describe the results of the analyses that are specifically related to the topic of the present study.

*Were AC members less congruent than HC members?*

AC members showed a lower congruence than HC members (as reported by the main effect of group) for most of the investigated variables. More specifically, AC members made greater errors regarding the emotional control and the intensity of emotions experienced by their partner than did HC members. They also made greater errors regarding the frequency of shame, fear, guilt, affection, jealousy, and anger experienced by their partner than did HC members.

*What kind of errors did AC members make? Did they tend to overestimate or underestimate the evaluation of their partner's EFS in comparison with HC members?*

As shown by Direction x Group interactions, AC members overestimated as much as they underestimated the general intensity and the control of their partner's EFS. For frequency, post hoc analyses indicated that both AC partners underestimated more than they overestimated the frequency of their partner's thinking about emotions,  $F = 8.64$ , 1/56 df,  $p < .01$ . Furthermore, AC members overestimated as much as they underestimated the intensity of each of the emotions reported by their partner.

*Were AH less congruent with their wife regarding the evaluation of their wife's EFS than were AW with their husband regarding their husband's EFS?*

As indicated by Group x Gender interactions, the results support this notion only for the emotion of anguish. However, post hoc analyses indicated that the difference between AH and AW didn't reach a statistical level of significance,  $F = 2.59$ , 1/56 df,  $p = .08$ .

*Did AH make different kinds of errors than their wives?*

AH and AW differed in the kinds of errors they made for the following emotions: shame, joy, fear, and anger, as indicated by the significant Direction x Group x Gender interactions for these variables. In the analysis that followed, the three negative emotions shame, fear, and anger were regrouped in one variable. Post hoc analyses showed that AH underestimated as a whole the frequency of the three negative emotions reported by their partner more than they overestimated it,  $F = 29.50$ , 1/56 df,  $p < .01$ , whereas the opposite was found in AW,  $F = 4.57$ , 1/56 df,  $p = .03$ . AW underestimated the frequency of the emotion of joy reported by their partner more than they overestimated it,  $F = 12.68$ , 1/72 df,  $p < .001$ , whereas no difference emerged for their husband.

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Insert Table 2 and Table 3 about here  
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### *Correlational analyses*

Pearson correlations were conducted to examine the association between the marital satisfaction scores of the subject and of his or her partner on the one hand, and the self-esteem and congruence on the other hand. In order not to increase the number of analyses conducted, a global score of congruence was computed by adding the 12 scores together (sum of overestimation and underestimation). The correlations are shown in Table 4. In HC, significant correlations emerged between (a) the subject's marital satisfaction and congruence

with the partner,  $r(30) = -.41$ ,  $p = .02$ , and (b) the partner's marital satisfaction and congruence with the partner,  $r(30) = -.40$ ,  $p = .03$ . Thus, the more an HC member was congruent with his or her partner regarding the evaluation of his or her partner's EFS, the more this HC member and his or her partner were satisfied with their relationship. The correlations between (a) the subject's marital satisfaction and self-esteem,  $r(30) = .30$ ,  $p = .11$ , and (b) the partner's marital satisfaction and self-esteem,  $r(30) = .40$ ,  $p = .13$ , did not reach a level of significance. In AC, no correlation reached a level of significance.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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Furthermore, correlations were conducted to examine concordance between both partners' scores on the variables of marital satisfaction, self-esteem, and congruence. Results are presented in Table 5. In HC, correlations emerged for marital satisfaction,  $r(30) = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ , and for congruence,  $r(30) = .46$ ,  $p = .01$ . HC members were concordant in their evaluation of marital satisfaction as well as in their awareness of the evaluation of their partner's EFS. The correlation for self-esteem didn't reach a level of significance,  $r(30) = .10$ ,  $p = .59$ . In AC, none of these correlations reached a level of statistical significance.

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Insert Table 5 about here

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## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate correlates of poor marital satisfaction in AC. In line with past literature, both AC members reported a worse marital satisfaction than HC members. They also reported lower self-esteem and were globally less congruent with their partner regarding the evaluation of their partner's EFS.

Overall, in the present investigation, AC members were less congruent with their partner than HC members regarding their perception of their partner's EFS. Nevertheless, errors were as much due to underestimation of their partner's EFS as to overestimation of it. Verbal and non-verbal communication deficits (including non accurate decoding of emotional facial expression and prosody), rare and short conversations, and discordance between expressed and felt emotions could intervene in the low congruence between partners. Moreover, as we assessed the subject's memories regarding his or her EFS, memory and other biases could have an impact on the subject's evaluation of his or her own EFS. This low congruence between AC members is in line with the observational studies of marital discussions in AC that have reported interactional difficulties. The studies have shown that AC are characterized by high rates of negative affect expression (criticism, complaining, excuses, withdrawal, etc.) both verbally and nonverbally, few supportive and constructive responses, and frequent withdrawals during conflictual discussions (e.g., Haber & Jacob, 1997; Jacob & Krahn, 1988; Jacob & Leonard, 1992; O'Farrell & Birchler, 1987). A low level of congruence could explain, at least in part, these observations. Indeed, the low level of congruence can result in a vicious circle. Partners do not feel understood by each other, and thus the conversation is aborted within a short space of time or else it turns into a conflict. This low quality of verbal communication reinforces the misunderstanding of the other's EFS. These behaviors can precipitate conflict, violence, and marital dissatisfaction.

AW seem to be as inaccurate as their husbands in the perception of the EFS reported by their partner. Nevertheless, for the emotions of shame, joy, fear, and anger, the errors in terms of underestimation and overestimation differed from those of AH. First, AH underestimated more than they overestimated the three negative emotions reported by their partner, whereas AW overestimated more than they underestimated these negative emotions. Second, AH overestimated more than they underestimated the emotion of joy reported by

their partner, whereas the opposite was true for AW. These results suggest that AH have a better image of their wife's EFS than she herself reports, and that, by contrast, AW have a worse image of their husband's EFS than he himself reports. The mistrust and the high level of anger felt by the alcoholic's wife due to repeated broken promises by her partner that he will change (O'Farrell & Bayog, 1986) could result in a bad image of the alcoholic and of his emotional life. Another explanation is that mistakes could come from the use of a self-evaluation questionnaire: AH might underestimate the destructive effect of alcoholism on both their own and their partner's EFS.

Interestingly, AW self-esteem was as low as AH self-esteem, with both being lower than HC members' self-esteem. This study is the first to report a low level of self-esteem in AW. This result is in line with the results of previous research indicators of distress in alcoholics' wives (Kahler et al., 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2006; Tempier et al., 2006). The low self-esteem of both AC members could have repercussions on marital satisfaction. Research involving healthy individuals has shown that people with a low level of self-esteem have difficulty in finding evidence of their partner's acceptance. In other words, they underestimate how much their partner loves them (Murray et al., 2001), and the partner's slightest offense is overgeneralized and seen as a sign of impending rejection (Murray et al., 2002).

The main results from the correlational analyses can be summarized as followed. First, as predicted, in HC, the more the participants were congruent with their partner regarding their partner's EFS, the more their partner and they themselves were satisfied with their couple relationship. Surprisingly, this correlation was not significant in AC. Second, marital satisfaction was not significantly correlated with self-esteem in either group. This absence of a significant correlation between marital satisfaction and self-esteem contrasts with previous literature on self-esteem in marriages of healthy couples (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993;



Shackelford, 2001). This is surely a result of our small sample size, as correlations from other studies, which range between .22 and .37, are quite comparable to ours. Third, HC partners were convergent for marital satisfaction and congruence but not for self-esteem. Johnson et al. (1992) outlined that responses to marital satisfaction measures are due to factors from the relationship rather than individual perceptions or response tendencies. The strong association between one partner's congruence with the other partner regarding the other partner's EFS in HC may result from the fact that a large part of this variable is due to the amount and to the quality of the couple's communication, which, obviously, are the same for both members of a couple. Another possibility is that individuals choose a partner with the same cognitive abilities or the same communication skills as theirs. Fourth, in AC, none of these correlations were significant, that is AH and AW did not seem to be convergent for marital satisfaction, self-esteem, or congruence.

Overall, four significant correlations in HC were not significant in AC. For correlations involving the marital satisfaction variable (i.e., marital satisfaction and the subject's congruence, marital satisfaction and the partner's congruence, partners' marital satisfaction), a possible explanation for this non-significance is that social desirability interfered with the self-reported marital satisfaction measure of AC. Social desirability is the tendency for respondents to avoid admitting unpopular actions or beliefs in order to present themselves favorably. Rychtarik et al. (1989) investigated the role of social desirability on self-reported marital satisfaction in 143 alcoholics and their wives. In accord with other studies (e.g., Epstein et al., 1997; Jacob & Leonard, 1992; O'Farrell & Birchler, 1987), alcoholics rated their marriage as significantly more satisfying than did their wives. There was a considerable redundancy between measures of social desirability and marital satisfaction in alcoholics but not in their wives. That study showed that alcoholics present their marriage in an unrealistically favorable manner. In our study, AH ( $M = 92.33$ ,  $SD = 21.10$ ) were more

satisfied with their relationship than were AW ( $M = 75.00$ ,  $SD = 31.37$ ) but not in a significant way. The absence of significant correlations with the marital satisfaction measure in AC could partly result from the tendency of alcoholics to minimize the seriousness of alcohol problems and their consequences on marital problems. Furthermore, the low level of congruence in both AC members, which can reflect a low level of awareness of the partner's emotional life, could be at stake in the null correlation between partners' marital satisfaction. Indeed, the partner's emotional life includes his or her level of satisfaction about marriage. Thus, AC members could also have a low level of awareness of their partner's marital satisfaction. Thus, satisfaction or dissatisfaction about the relationship is not reinforced by the perception of the partner's satisfaction.

Several limitations need to be considered when evaluating these results. First, we treated alcoholism as a homogeneous condition despite the fact that several studies have reported differences in marital interaction between different subtypes of alcoholism (e.g., Floyd et al., 2006; Epstein et al., 1997; Leonard & Jacob, 1997). Nevertheless, the fact that alcoholics in our sample were all men in a stable relationship (at least four years) reduced the group heterogeneity. Second, as outlined earlier, the use of self-report questionnaires could allow social desirability to interfere with the results. A third limitation was that the representativeness of the AC group, and more specifically the marital satisfaction of this group, could be biased by the fact that all patients were in treatment (i.e., a condition that increases a partner's level of marital satisfaction, Epstein et al., 1997) during the time of the assessment. Finally, the small sample size of this study requires staying very cautious with the results interpretation.

In conclusion, in spite of these limitations, this study shows marked differences between AC and HC. This study is the first to show that the alcoholic's wife seems to present as much difficulties as the alcoholic himself regarding level of self-esteem and congruence

with their partner regarding the evaluation of their partner's EFS. Future studies need to take an interest in the origin of low self-esteem in the alcoholic's wife. Does low self-esteem predispose her to have a relationship with an alcoholic, or does being in a relationship with an alcoholic lead to a decrease in self-esteem? A low level of congruence with the partner regarding the evaluation of the partner's EFS and low self-esteem could have repercussions on marital happiness, which itself interferes with the alcoholic's treatment. Future studies need to try to understand the association between these deficits and the level of marital dissatisfaction in AC. The association between low self-esteem and low marital satisfaction could be mediated by difficulty in seeing signs of love and acceptance in their partner. Furthermore, the study of empathy and its role in marital satisfaction in AC needs to be extended beyond cognitive empathy (as studied here) to investigate the capacity for emotional empathy. Within a couples' therapy context, the present study outlines the importance of focusing also on the distress of the alcoholic's partner. The therapist must promote the expression of both partners' emotions verbally and non-verbally and the receptivity of the other partner's emotional expression.

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Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of the Demographical Measures, the Marital Satisfaction Measure, and the Self-Esteem Measure as a Function of Group (Alcoholic vs. Healthy) and Gender (Husband vs. Wife)*

Variables	Statistics	Alcoholic		Healthy	
		Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife
		(n = 15)	(n = 15)	(n = 15)	(n = 15)
Age (in years)	<i>M</i>	46.53	46.00	47.53	44.00
	<i>SD</i>	9.66	9.92	9.78	8.66
Years of education <sup>a</sup>	<i>M</i>	12.53	13.40	12.93	13.00
	<i>SD</i>	3.20	2.47	3.10	3.57
Length of relationship (in years)	<i>M</i>	22.33	22.33	21.53	21.53
	<i>SD</i>	12.18	12.18	11.85	11.85
Length of cohabitation (in years)	<i>M</i>	19.69	19.69	20.13	20.13
	<i>SD</i>	11.94	11.94	11.21	11.21
MAT <sup>b</sup>	<i>M</i>	92.33	75.00	114.93	122.00
	<i>SD</i>	21.10	31.37	27.81	18.81
CSEI <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>	29.47	31.73	40.33	35.40
	<i>SD</i>	9.72	7.93	5.04	8.06

<sup>a</sup>since starting primary school. <sup>b</sup> MAT = Marital Adjustment Test. <sup>c</sup> CSEI = Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory.

Table 2

*Analysis of Variance on the 12 Measures of Congruence as a Function of Group (Alcoholic vs. Healthy), Gender (Husband vs. Wife), and Direction (Underestimation vs. Overestimation)*

<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	$\frac{\text{Intensity}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Frequency}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Control}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Shame}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Joy}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Fear}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Guilt}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Affection}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Jealousy}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Sadness}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Anguish}}{F}$	$\frac{\text{Anger}}{F}$
Between subjects													
Gr	1/56	4.02*	1.88	4.41*	8.38**	0.17	5.43*	9.60**	4.14*	6.62*	0.51	0.68	8.95**
Gd	1/56	0.13	0.10	0.06	0.84	0.17	3.05	2.86	0.61	0.00	5.66*	2.39	0.44
Gr x Gd	1/56	0.13	0.10	0.85	0.12	0.81	0.34	0.18	0.88	0.00	1.41	8.93**	0.44
Within subject													
D	1/56	0.32	2.31	0.03	1.23	3.89	0.00	2.43	0.09	13.53**	31.05**	17.70**	2.06
D x Gr	1/56	0.01	6.96*	0.35	1.23	1.78	1.29	0.91	0.00	0.11	0.06	1.97	1.47
D x Gn	1/56	0.79	0.16	0.14	1.75	0.10	0.00	4.69*	5.03*	0.00	4.75*	0.28	14.90**
D x Gr x Gd	1/56	0.53	0.16	2.41	20.22**	12.23**	4.32*	1.92	0.01	0.05	1.47	1.51	4.39*

Notes: Gr = Group, Gd = Gender, D = Direction.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of Congruence as a Function of Group (Alcoholic vs. Healthy) and Gender (Husband vs. Wife)*

Congruence	Direction	Alcoholic		Healthy	
		Husband (n = 15)	Wife (n = 15)	Husband (n = 15)	Wife (n = 15)
Intensity	Under	0.47 (1.06)	0.80 (1.15)*	0.40 (0.63)*	0.33 (0.72)
	Over	0.93 (1.22)*	0.60 (1.12)	0.53 (0.83)*	0.40 (0.83)
Frequency	Under	1.13 (1.50)*	1.13 (1.68)*	0.40 (0.63)*	0.33 (0.72)
	Over	0.27 (0.80)	0.27 (0.59)	0.47 (0.74)*	0.73 (0.80)*
Control	Under	0.93 (1.53)*	1.07 (1.79)*	1.00 (1.65)*	0.53 (0.99)
	Over	1.53 (1.88)**	0.93 (1.10)**	0.27 (0.46)*	1.00 (1.46)**
Shame	Under	2.80 (2.54)**	0.67 (1.23)	0.27 (0.59)	1.13 (1.41)**
	Over	0.27 (0.59)	1.80 (1.93)**	1.27 (1.98)*	0.13 (0.52)
Joy	Under	0.67 (1.40)	1.93 (2.21)**	1.33 (1.50)**	0.40 (0.91)
	Over	0.80 (0.86)**	0.07 (0.26)	0.33 (0.62)	1.07 (1.44)*
Fear	Under	2.13 (2.00)**	0.87 (1.30)*	0.33 (0.72)	0.80 (1.32)*
	Over	1.00 (1.93)	1.20 (2.24)	1.47 (1.92)*	0.47 (0.92)
Guilt	Under	3.00 (2.73)**	1.13 (1.64)*	1.27 (1.62)**	0.67 (1.11)*
	Over	0.67 (1.59)	1.53 (2.13)*	0.73 (1.16)*	0.73 (1.44)
Affection	Under	1.40 (1.99)*	1.07 (1.98)	1.20 (1.08)**	0.40 (0.63)*
	Over	0.60 (1.35)	1.67 (2.23)*	0.33 (0.62)	1.07 (1.28)**
Jealousy	Under	0.67 (1.11)*	0.60 (1.59)	0.20 (0.56)	0.27 (0.59)
	Over	1.80 (2.04)**	1.87 (1.88)**	1.27 (1.03)**	1.20 (1.42)**
Sadness	Under	1.53 (1.60)**	0.07 (0.26)	0.87 (1.46)*	0.40 (0.63)*
	Over	1.87 (1.36)**	1.33 (1.40)**	1.47 (1.36)**	1.27 (0.96)**
Anguish	Under	2.33 (1.84)**	0.53 (1.06)	0.60 (0.91)*	1.20 (1.32)**
	Over	2.53 (1.64)**	1.40 (1.18)**	1.80 (1.90)**	2.13 (1.46)**
Anger	Under	2.80 (1.90)**	0.73 (1.39)	1.07 (1.62)*	0.53 (0.74)*
	Over	0.20 (0.56)	1.73 (1.98)**	0.47 (0.52)**	1.00 (1.60)*

*Notes.* Scores are the absolute values of the difference between the subject's attributed-to-the partner item and his or her partner's self-attributed item. They range from 0 to 9; higher score indicates a worse knowledge of the partner's evaluation of his or her emotional experience. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

\* differ from 0 at  $p < .05$  . \*\* differ from 0 at  $p < .01$ .

Table 4

*Correlations between (a) Marital Satisfaction of the Subject and of the Partner and (b) Congruence and Self-Esteem as a function of Group (Alcoholic vs. Healthy)*

	Alcoholic (n = 30)		Healthy (n = 30)	
	Subject's Satisfaction	Partner's Satisfaction	Subject's Satisfaction	Partner's Satisfaction
Congruence	-.14	-.15	-.41*	-.40*
Self-esteem	.15	.07	.30	.28

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

Table 5

*Correlations Between both Partners of the Same Couple on Marital Satisfaction, Congruence, and Self-Esteem as a function of Group (Alcoholic vs. Healthy)*

	Alcoholic (n = 30)	Healthy (n = 30)
Satisfaction	.00	.48**
Congruence	.14	.46**
Self-esteem	-.06	.10

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$



## Appendix

### Questionnaire on the Emotional Communication Between a Couple

In our daily life, we feel different emotions like joy, sadness, fear, etc. And we also interpret and imagine the emotions felt by our spouse. The present research is on that subject. We are trying to understand the link between the emotions felt by a person and the perception of those by his or her spouse. We have written this questionnaire for that purpose. The questionnaire is made up of general questions regarding the type of emotions that you and your spouse feel, their intensity, their frequency, and the degree of control over them.

All responses will remain anonymous; thus the confidentiality of this questionnaire will be totally respected. The questionnaires won't be communicated to anyone other than those directly involved in this research.

The object of this research is to have a better understanding of the emotional communication between spouses in order to help more efficiently a couple in difficulty.

You need to answer the questions on a scale of 1 - 10. Here is an example of how to use the scale:

If, in your opinion, Belgian weather is much nicer than the average weather in other countries, your answer would be as follows:

Much less nice than in other countries 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **8** 9 Much nicer than in other countries

If, in your opinion, Belgian weather is equally as nice as the average weather in other countries, your answer will be as follows:

Much less nice than in other countries 0 1 2 3 **4** 5 6 7 8 9 Much nicer than in other countries

Please, take care to circle only one answer on the scale for each question and not to miss out on indicating your choice on any of the scales in answering the questions. Incomplete questionnaires can't be analyzed.

Don't hesitate to ask any questions to the person that gave you the questionnaire. Thank you in advance for your collaboration.

Intensity:

In general,

- Do you feel your emotions (of joy, of anger, of fear, etc.) in a way  
much less strongly than others 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 much more strongly than others

- Do you think your spouse feels his or her emotions in a way  
much less strongly than others 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 much more strongly than others

Frequency

In general,

- Do you think about your emotions  
far less often than others 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 far more often than others

- Do you think your spouse thinks about his or her emotions  
far less often than others 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 far more often than others

Control

In general,

- Do you succeed in controlling your emotions  
much worse than others 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 much better than others

- Do you think that your spouse succeeds in controlling his or her emotions  
much worse than others 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 much better than others

Type of emotions

- Do you feel shame?  
Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels shame?  
Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel joy?  
Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels joy?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel fear?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels fear?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel guilt?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels guilt?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel affection?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels affection?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel jealousy?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels jealousy?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel sadness?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels sadness?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel anguish?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels anguish?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you feel anger?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently

- Do you think that your spouse feels anger?

Never 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Frequently